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Â OF OHIO
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Mr. Speaker, people who work full time should not live in poverty. Yet America's minimum wage has been set at \$5.15 for the last decade, while the costs of housing, health care, education and gasoline have skyrocketed. This stagnant wage represents a decline in purchasing power for the working class, so great that it is at its lowest value in a half a century when adjusted for inflation.

The Democrats have a proposal to raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 over the next 2 years. The Republican leadership of this Chamber, however, saw fit to block this legislation from reaching the House floor for a vote. Ironically, that Republican majority then voted to raise their own pay.

Last week, I voted once again to block the automatic pay raises for Congress, called cost-of-living adjustments. Don't those at the low end of the pay scale deserve more than those at the very top? Don't they deserve more attention? My office has been flooded with letters and emails urging the increase in the minimum wage. Some of my constituents write because they are struggling to pay their bills with minimum-wage salaries. Others are earning more than the minimum wage, but promote the increase, anyway, as they realize this is also a moral issue. Yes, people who work should not live in poverty.

One of my constituents wrote me a series of questions that I believe my Republican colleagues who are opposed to increasing the minimum wage could benefit from hearing. One constituent asked: ``How do you distinguish between the working poor and their need for a raise and Congress' need for a raise?"

Another: ``Do you ever decide not to go to an event because you have to make your auto's gas last until the end of the week?"

Or: ``When your child is sick, do you look at your budget to see where the \$20 copay for the prescription is going to come from?"

Or: ``When I get an extra \$50, I put it towards my running bill at the VA for my prescriptions. Basic needs. What are Members of Congress going to do with their raise?"

The American people are asking.

Frankly, they should turn them down and let them be given to those who need the help. Unfortunately, millions of Americans are faced with vital decisions daily, things too many Members of Congress take for granted. These Americans are among the working poor with full-time jobs earning \$5.15 an hour. Millions fall into this boat, even more when you consider that the poverty line has not been adequately adjusted to reflect the true level of poverty in this country.

My Republican colleagues who are against the minimum wage cannot identify with that struggle. Opponents argue the market should dictate wages. Well, Mr. Speaker, we know the market works very imperfectly. They favor those with capital and those who inherit it, even with no work of their own. A market where chief executive officers make 262 times that of the average worker and 821 times that of the minimum-wage worker is not a market that is working well. And it is surely not working well enough to build a solid middle class.

This same erroneous argument of letting the market dictate has been used to tout the value of flawed trade agreements like CAFTA and NAFTA. These lopsided agreements have been structured in a way to favor capital over workers across borders, outsourcing more of our jobs and putting a crushing downward squeeze on the middle class and on keeping the minimum wage at rock bottom.

Â Â Â Trade agreements that do not have protections for workers are fueling the influx of immigrants into our country. These workers do not necessarily prefer America to their home country. It is just that these poor trade agreements have really wiped out their livelihoods, and they are fleeing to the United States. These workers are willing, due to dire circumstances, to work for sub-minimum wages which in turn depresses all wages in on our country.

People who go to work every day and perform the services essential to keeping our economy functioning deserve to live above the poverty level. America is the richest nation in the world. It should be able to pay a living wage and build a middle class for those who hold the least in society. We need to reward work itself, or it will lose its value. The definition of opportunity in this country will lose its value. We should follow our conscience and raise the minimum wage.

I ask those who are listening in this Chamber and elsewhere to write their Member of Congress and urge an increase in the minimum wage in our country from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 an hour over the next 2 years. It is the right thing to do.